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Writing Sample

Sara Baume

Excerpt from Spill Simmer Falter Wither.

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Sara BAUME

From *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*

Prologue

He is running, running, running. And it's like no kind of running he's ever run before. He's the surge that burst the dam and he's pouring down the hillslope, channelling through the grass to the width of his widest part. He's tripping into hoof-rucks. He's slapping groundsel stems down dead. Dandelions and chickweed, nettles and dock. This time, there's no chance for sniff and scavenge and scoff. There are no steel bars to end his lap, no chain to jerk at the limit of its extension, no bellowing to trick and bully him back. This time, he's farther than he's ever seen before, past every marker along the horizon line, every hump and spork he learned by heart. It's the season of digging out. It's a day of soft rain. There's wind enough to tilt the slimmer trunks off kilter and drizzle enough to twist the long hairs on his back to a mop of damp curls. There's blood enough to gush into his beard and spatter his front paws as they rise and plunge. And there's a hot, wet thing bouncing against his neck. It's the size of a snailshell and it makes a dim squelch each time it strikes. It's attached to some gristly tether dangling from some leaked part of himself, but he cannot make out the what nor the where of it. Were he to stop, were he to examine the hillslope and hoofrucks and groundsel and dandelions and chickweed and nettles and dock, he'd see how the breadth of his sight span has been reduced by half and shunted to his right side, how the left is pitch black until he swivels his head. But he doesn't stop, and notices only the cumbersome blades, the spears of rain, the upheaval of tiny insects and the blood spilling down the wrong side of his coat, the outer when it ought to be the inner. He is running, running, running. And there's no course or current to deter him. There's no impulse from the root of his brain to the roof of his skull which says other than RUN. He is One Eye now. He is on his way.

You find me on a Tuesday, on my Tuesday trip to town. You're sellotaped to the inside pane of the jumble shop window. A photograph of your mangled face and underneath an appeal for a COMPASSIONATE & TOLERANT OWNER. A PERSON WITHOUT OTHER PETS & WITHOUT CHILDREN UNDER FOUR. The notice shares street-facing space with a sheepskin overcoat, a rubberwood tambourine, a stuffed wigeon and a calligraphy set. The overcoat's sagged and the tambourine's punctured.

The wigeon's trickling sawdust and the calligraphy set's likely to be missing inks or nibs or paper, almost certainly the instruction leaflet. There's something sad about the jumble shop, but I like it. I like how it's a tiny refuge of imperfection. I always stop to gawp at the window display and it always makes me feel a little less horrible, less strange. But I've never noticed the notices before. There are several, each with a few lines of text beneath a hazy photograph. Altogether they form a hotchpotch of pleading eyes, foreheads worried into furry folds, tails frozen to a hopeful wag. The sentences underneath use words like NEUTERED, VACCINATED, MICROCHIPPED, CRATETRAINED.

Every wet nose in the window is alleged to be searching for its FOREVER HOME. I'm on my way to purchase a box-load of incandescent bulbs because I can't bear the dimness of the energy savers, how they hesitate at first and then build to a parasitic humming so soft it hoaxes me into thinking some part of my inner ear has cracked, or some vital vessel of my frontal lobe. I stop and fold my hands and examine the fire-spitting dragon painted onto the tambourine's stretched skin and the wigeon's bright feet bolted to a hunk of ornamental cedar, its wings pinioned to a flightless expansion. And I wonder if the calligraphy set is missing its instruction leaflet. You're sellotaped to the bottommost corner. Your photograph is the least distinct and your face is the most grisly. I have to bend down to inspect you and as I move, the shadows shift with my bending body and blank out the glass of the jumble shop window, and I see myself instead. I see my head sticking out of your back like a bizarre excrescence. I see my own mangled face peering dolefully from the black.

The shelter is a forty-minute drive and three short, fat cigarettes from home. It occupies a strip of land along the invisible line at which factories and housing estates give way to forests and fields. There are rooftops on one side, treetops on the other. Concrete underfoot and chainlink fencing all around, its PVC-coated diamonds rattling with the anxious quivers of creatures MISTREATED, ABANDONED, ABUSED. Adjacent to the diamonds, there's a flat-headed building with unsound walls and a cavity block wedged under each corner. A signpost rises from the cement. RECEPTION it says, REPORT ON ARRIVAL. I'm not the kind of person who is able to do things. I don't feel very good about climbing the steps and pushing the door, but I don't feel very good about disobeying instructions either. My right hand finds my left hand and they hold each other. Now I step up and they knock as one. The door falls open. Inside there's a woman sitting behind a large screen between two filing cabinets. There's something brittle about her. She seems small in proportion to the screen, but it isn't that. It's in the way the veins of each temple rise through her skin; it's in the way her eyelids are the colour of a climaxing bruise. 'Which one?' she says and shows me a sheet of miniature photographs. As I place the tip of my index finger against the tip of your miniaturised nose, she ever-so-slightly smiles. I sign a form and pay a donation. The brittle woman speaks into a walkie-talkie and now there's a kennel keeper waiting outside the flat-headed office. I hadn't imagined it might be so uncomplicated as this. He's a triangular man. Loafy shoulders tapering into flagpole legs, the silhouette of a root vegetable. He's carrying a collar and leash. He swings them at his side and talks loudly as he guides me through the shelter. 'That cur's for the injection I said, soon's I saw him, and wouldn't cha know, straight off he sinks his chompers into a friendly fella's cheek and won't let go. There he is, there.' The kennel keeper points to a copper-coated cocker spaniel in a cage

with a baby blanket and a burger-shaped squeak toy. The spaniel looks up as we pass and I see a pair of pink punctures in the droop of his muzzle. 'Vicious little bugger. Had to prise his jaws loose and got myself bit in the process. Won't be learning his way out of a nature like that. Another day, y'know, and he'd a been put down.' I nod, even though the kennel keeper isn't looking at me. I picture him at home in a house where all of the pot plants belong to his wife and the front garden's been tarmaced into an enormous driveway. His walls are magnolia and his kitchen cupboards are stocked with special toasting bread and he uses the bread not only for toasting, but for everything. 'Any good for ratting?' I say. 'Good little ratter alright,' the kennel keeper says, 'there he is, there,' and now I see he is pointing at you. You're all on your own in a solitary confinement kennel beside the recycling bins. There's a stench of old meat, of hundreds and hundreds of desiccated globules stuck to the inside of carelessly rinsed cans. There's dust and sweet wrappers and cardboard cups whirling in from the whoomph of traffic passing on the road. There's the sound of yipping and whinging from around the corner and out of sight. It's a sad place, and you are smaller than I expected.

You growl as the kennel keeper grabs you by the scruff and buckles the collar, but you don't snap. And when you walk, there's no violence, no malice in the way you move. There's nothing of the pariah I expected. You are leaning low, nearly dragging your body along the ground, as though carrying a great lump of fear. 'Easy now,' the kennel keeper tells you. 'Easy.' — What must I look like through your lonely peephole? You're only the height of my calf and I'm a boulder of a man. Shabbily dressed and sketchily bearded. Steamrolled features and ironfiling stubble. When I stand still, I stoop, weighted down by my own lump of fear. When I move, my clodhopper feet and mismeasured legs make me pitch and clump. My callused kneecaps pop in and out of my shredded jeans and my hands flail gracelessly, stupidly. I've always struggled with my hands. I've never known exactly what to do with them when they're not being flailed. I've a fiendish habit of picking the hard skin encircling each fingernail, drawing it slowly down into a bloodless hangnail. When I'm out in the world and moving, I stop myself picking by flailing, and when I stand still I fold my hands fast over my stomach. I knit my fingers in restraint. When I'm alone inside and unmoving, I stop myself picking by smoking instead. In certain lights at certain angles, reflecting certain surfaces, I am an old man. I'm an old man in the windshield of the car and the backside of my soup spoon. I'm an old man in the living room window after dark and the narrow mirrors at either side of the tall fridge in the grocer's. Whenever I go to close the curtains or lean in to reach for milk or margarine or forest fruit yoghurt, I'm an old man. My brow curls down to tickle my eyeballs, my teeth are stained ochre, my frown lines are so well gouged they never disappear, not even when I smile. Although I'm impervious to my own smell, I'm certain I smell old. More must and porridge and piss, I suspect, than sugar and apples and soap. I'm fifty-seven. Too old for starting over, too young for giving up. And my name is the same word as for sun beams, as for winged and boneless sharks. But I'm far too solemn and inelegant to be named for either, and besides, my name is just another strange sound sent from the mouths of men to confuse you, to distract from your vocabulary of commands. There's a book on one of my book shelves, now its pages are crinkled by damp, but it's about how birds and fish and animals communicate, and somewhere it says that animals like you are capable of learning to understand as much as one-hundred-and-sixty-five human words, roughly the same as a two-year-old child. I'm not so sure, but that's what the book with crinkled pages says. There was a time when my hair was black as a rook with flashes of electric blue in certain lights at certain angles, now it's splotched with grey like a dishevelled jackdaw. I wear it fastened into a plait and flung down the stoop of my boulderish back, and sometimes I think that if I had people I bantered about with, they'd nickname me CHIEF for the wideness of my face and the way I wear my womanly hair, for the watery longing in my wonkety eyes. Only I don't have anybody I banter about with. My confinement has walls and windows and doors instead of PVC-coated diamonds, but still it's solitary. Still I'm all on my own, like

you. Everywhere I go it's as though I'm wearing a spacesuit which buffers me from other people. A big, shiny one-piece which obscures how small and dull I feel inside. I know that you can't see it; I can't see it either, but when I pitch and clump and flail down the street, grown men step into the drain gully to avoid brushing against my invisible spacesuit. When I queue to pay at a supermarket checkout, the cashier presses the backup bell and takes her toilet break. When I drive past a children's playground, some au-pair nearly always makes a mental note of my registration number. 93-OY-5731. They all think I don't notice. But I do.

'In!' The kennel keeper tells you. We are three of us standing on the compound's concrete, and you are refusing to climb into the car. The triangular man is beginning to bristle. It must be almost lunchtime and so his mind's already sitting in the canteen, already eating fat sandwiches on his mouth's behalf. He hoists you from the ground and plonks you onto the back seat. 'Right you are now,' he says, his voice is toneless, insincere. 'Best of luck.' You try to resist the slam of the door, spinning your head around to check for other ways out. What does my old car smell like? Like salt and oil and dust mites, stale popcorn and wizened peel? The back seat is covered by a red blanket and the fibres of the blanket are embedded with sand. Have you ever seen sand before? I don't expect so. You bow your head as though contemplating all of these most minuscule and pearliest of stones. In the driver's seat, I'm fastening my belt, slotting key into ignition. As the engine begins to putter, you lift your head to the rear windscreen. You watch as the flat-headed cabin shrinks to the size of a photograph on a postcard, a picture on a stamp, and now gone. Now we are driving from the city and into the suburbs. There are cherry trees lining the roadway in full flower, spitting tiny pink pinches of themselves into the traffic. See the rhododendron and laburnum getting ready to rupture, the forsythia and the willow, weeping. There's enough laurel to hedge a stadium arena, and every time we speed up, everything is transformed to a mulch of earthy colours and overstretched shapes. But you back away from the mulch, and stretch. You clamber into the front of the car, over the handbrake and the passenger seat. You crouch beneath the dashboard with the heat of the bonnet pressed to your back and the gush of tarmac just a fine layer of steel beneath. Now the suburbs become dual carriageway, the cherry blossoms subside to central embankments of overgrown lawn. The shorter grass is frothed with daisies. And it's a handsome little piece of wilderness, a tiny refuge of imperfection. But you won't come out to look. You stay beneath the dash with only your nose protruding. The particular way it moves reminds me of a maggot squirming. What are you whiffing through the air vents? Pollen and petrol and painted plaster? Now we are passing houses with people inside and shops with goods inside and churches with chalky gods inside, now we are rounding a roundabout and pulling off onto the back road for home. Brace yourself for the potholes and corners, the bump and slide. You hit your head against the glove compartment and grunt, a perfectly hog-like grunt. Now if your lost eye was inside your maggot nose you'd see a field of rape at its yellow zenith against a backdrop of velvet grey, which is the sky. You'd see the rape caving into neverending blue, which is the sea. Has your maggot nose ever seen the sea before? I don't expect so. We're following the curve of the bay, we're parking with two wheels abutting the footpath outside a salmon pink house, which is my father's salmon pink house and my solitary confinement, which is home. Sometimes I think if I took the handbrake off, anywhere in the world, the car would roll itself back here, to the footpath outside the terrace beside the bay, grudgingly yet irresistibly. But I've never been anywhere in the world. I wouldn't know how to get there in the first place. Now you're refusing to climb from the car. I squat on the ground and you glower from your crawl space. I push the door wide to let the salt air in. It's rich and giddy, cloying with rot and fish and tang and wet. Your maggot nose catches the cloy and wriggles to life. Now it tugs your front paws forward and your front paws drag the rest of you after them. You grunt, but this time it has a different pitch; this time it's an

inquisitive grunt. Grudgingly yet irresistibly, you step out of shelter, and onto the sea front. Welcome home, One Eye, my good little ratter. — I don't know exactly where I was born. A hospital, I suppose. Surrounded by spotlights and freshly laundered bed-sheets and a trolley of sterilised birthing tools. I find it hard to picture some scrubbed-up stranger wielding my naked, squawking self about as though I were a broiled ham. Instead I like to pretend I was born all alone without any fuss, without any gore. And right here, in my father's house. I like to believe the house itself gave birth to me, that I slithered down the chimney, fell ignobly into the fire grate and inhaled my first breath of cold, swirling ash. My father's house is one of the oldest in the village. It's two storeys tall and capped by slanting slate. Some slates are broken and some slates displaced and each is dusted with green down and rimmed by tiny hedgehogs of moss. The facade is garishly salmon and the roof is a manmade hillside all shaved and pressed out of shape from the creep of soil beneath its surface. Most of the ground floor is taken up by shop space, that's the reason for the signboard between hanging baskets. It's a hairdressing salon, which means the sounds that push through the floorboards are rushing water and hood dryers, pop music and high heels, the slicing laugh of the Polish hairdresser as she fakes friendly with whoever has just walked in. When I was a boy, the ground floor of my father's house was a ladies boutique. The lady who ran the boutique always stood two decapitated mannequins in the display window, and I couldn't understand why she dressed them so fashionably yet never bothered to fix on their heads. I used to be afraid that the mannequin's forgotten faces would chew their way out of a cupboard by night to rove between the sleeping clothes rails. I'd swear I could hear them, gnashing and dragging themselves across the carpet by their eyebrows. After the boutique shut down, the estate agent used the window as a billboard for advertising his properties. For several years I got to snoop inside every house for sale or rent within a three village radius without ever travelling beyond the front footpath. As a boy, I imagined I lived in every last one. And in every last newly renovated semi-detached with off-white walls and a fitted kitchen, I imagined I was a different boy, a new boy, a better boy. Apart from the salon, there's a Chinese takeaway, a grocer's, a chip shop and two pubs. It's a village of twitchers and sillywalkers, of old folk and alcoholics and men dressed in highvisibility overalls. There's a hummock of fat tanks at one end, that's the oil refinery. There's a chimney painted in red and white stripes like a barber's pole at the other end, that's the power station. In the middle, it's a nature reserve. Mallards and grebes paddle cheerfully through the drizzle. Herons stand stock-still and knee-high in tidal mud, pretending to be statues. Because of the oil refinery and the power station, the village murmurs. Sandwiched by the tunelessness of industry, the birds shriek and sing, defiantly. Follow me past the steel gate and down a laneway to the front door. Here's the hall, which looks like the inside of a clothes recycling unit. Wool and tweed and oilcloth spilling off coat hooks onto my wellingtons and the radiator, the banister. Almost none of the coats are mine, or at least they weren't mine to begin with. Now here's the kitchen, dark and poky with chipped tiles on the walls and unidentifiable stains on the lino. It smells of garlic and coffee and cigarette smoke and bins, and the bins smell of garlic skins and spent coffee grounds and cigarette butts. Leave the bins alone, okay? You're not allowed to pilfer tin cans and chicken bones, tissues hardened into abstract shapes by snot. Here's my mug with its indelible coating of black sludge. If I was a gypsy I'd read you my sludge like tea leaves, and if I was a visionary I'd show you the shape of a Jesus face on the base. Can you see it; can you see the Jesus face? Now follow me up the stairwell past the salon's partition into the upstairs hall. See my ornamental plates covering the decomposed plasterwork. They come from every snicket of the globe. This one with a picture of St George is Bermuda. The kookaburra is Australia and these two moustachioed men bartering their cockerels hail from Puerto Rico. Now Andorra has a cable car and Mallorca has almond trees and Hawaii has HAWAII embossed in gold letters, but Djibouti is my favourite. I've no idea where that is. This room with the carpet concealed by rugs is my bedroom. Each rug is made from the ripped and re-bound rags

of strangers from foreign lands. The rug strangers have bigger families but fewer belongings, brighter clothes but dimmer prospects and I feel somehow closer to them than I do the people deflected by my spacesuit in the street. Here's the bed, the rocking chair, the wardrobe and the fireplace, the grate into which the house delivered me. The buckets either side are one for coal and one for the logs I axe up on an ash stump out the back. Ash is the solidest of all wood; the log against which all other logs will inexorably split. What does my bedroom smell of? Damp spores, fluffed dirt and dead sap? See the black mould on the end wall, how it's mushroomed into a reverse constellation: the night sky a white wall and the white stars black and wet and furry. This curtain of wooden beads hides the bathroom, and when they get stirred up they make a noise like a landslide of tic-tacs, like a leak in a button factory. You're not allowed in the bathroom, okay? You're not allowed to lick splashes from the enamel. From every other lintel, multicoloured ribbons dangle from a thin strip of pine. It wasn't until after my father was gone that I nailed the rainbows up. Sometimes I tread on the ends and they snap back like a tiny riding crop. Sometimes they get tangled around my limbs as I pass and I rip them clean down, without meaning to. They are annoying. I know they're annoying. And yet, I nail them up again, every time. The bowerbird within me insists. Now for the living room, which lives up to its title and is the room where most of life takes place. I heard on the radio once that animals like you see in the same way as a colour-blind human, that your world is yellower and bluer and greyer than mine. If this is true then my living room walls will sear your lonely peephole, I'm sorry. They're painted the colour of purest egg yolk. Now the front window faces south and touches the roof beams. Here's the sofa and the coffee table and the television set which is mostly switched off with its screen turned to a dark mirror instead, to a tiny replica room all drained of its vibrancy. I look old in the switched-off television screen. It's one of the places I am an old man. Here are the curtains and indoor hanging plants and pictures in picture frames. I always forget to water the houseplants until their compost is so dry that the water trickles straight through and drips into the carpet. Or sometimes the plant's famished and gulps too much, drinks until its leaves go limp and pale and spongy, drinks until it drowns itself. Here's my aloe vera, see the bubbles through its translucent skin. See the picture frame. These smiling strangers inside, I don't know who they are. I just buy the frames and accept whoever comes inside them. They're just models chosen by the frame company, told to pose. Bowerbirds are the artists of the creature kingdom; impossibly susceptible to prettiness, they deck their nests like vortexshaped Christmas trees. There's a picture in one of these books on one of these bookshelves laden with spines of all different heights and colours and states of decay. Here are spines and spines and spines, raised to towers on the coffee table, queued into rows along the skirting boards. What do they smell like? Paper-worms and crackled glue, stale toast and aged sellotape. Now here, at the furthest end of the corridor, is the final room, the room with the trapladder reaching up through the trapdoor and into the roof where the spate of rats took place. See the wellworn knob and the keyless keyhole. See the draught snake laid across the threshold with its pink felted tongue sticking out from its untidy stitches in a menacing fork. You don't go in here, do you understand? I don't go in here either. — I see how you watch me closely, startle at the slightest of sudden shifts. I see you're still frightened, even though I haven't even raised my voice. Are you waiting for me to whip out a choke chain? For a backhanded nose slap, the butt of my boot? Now I have to put you out the kitchen door and shut you in the backyard, just for a moment. I have to go and buy groceries and I'm not sure about leaving you in the house alone just yet. Spaghetti hoops and gingernuts, a carton of milk and some tinned sardines. The backyard is a misshapen square with a stone fence the whole way round and a timber gate into next door's garden. It's floored by cracked cement and limestone chippings with weeds in places. Here's herb-robert, spurge, fumitory, a few other species less beautiful. Most of the green or brown or barely leafing plants in the pots lining the perimeter wall are the skeletons of last summer. Here's some purple sprouting broccoli,

the stems already gone to bolt, the heads to seed. Windmills spin furiously amongst the skeletons. Elsewhere wind-broken blades lie twitching on the gravel. Beneath the sheet of marred tarpaulin is the axing stump, the log pile, the garden hose. Here's the rotary washing line, the glasstopped table, the plastic patio chairs, and these are tens of bashed and fractured buoys in bleached shades of orange and yellow, and tens more shards of broken buoy, some still sharp but mostly sanded harmless by the sea. These are a collection, my collection. Please don't piss on them while I'm gone. As I leave, you're sitting on the mat. You're sitting with your whole body tensed as though in preparation for a blow. You look so mournful and helpless as I leave. You raise your head and watch as the kitchen door closes. Out the front and into the village, there's a blast of salt wind off the bay, an empty crisp packet gusting down the footpath, a string of bunting flapping from a telegraph pole. The grocer's girl, April, talks loudly on the telephone as she scans my goods, forgetting to proffer a paper bag. I've always imagined April was born in April and has three sisters called May, June and July, perhaps an only brother called December because if the summer is a woman, so the winter must be a man. I'm back at the gate and fumbling with the door key, milk and biscuits in one armpit, fish in the other, when I see you, when I see that you've escaped. You're on your way out of next door's laneway. Now you make a break across the road to the wall which follows the curve of the shore and you race alongside it past the street lamps and flowerbeds. How could you summon the will to jump so high? Five foot at least to scale the wooden gate. As you landed in next door's identical backyard, were you disappointed to find it was no more than the same cement and spurge and rotary line, another stone wall and five-foot gate? Now you're running, running, running, as though by running, you might understand. And I am watching, helpless. You arrive at the end of the village and seem to slow. Now you stop and turn around and look back over the length of where you've just run. Can you see me on the footpath? I've dropped the carton and stumbled to my knees. A rivulet of spilled milk catches the crisp packet, sails it to the gutter. Suddenly I don't care whether people can see me and hear me and know who I am; I don't care what they're thinking. My arms are outstretched and I'm calling your name over and over, louder and louder, wailing into the bay and sending all the oystercatchers soaring. ONEEYE ONEEYE ONEEYE ONEEYE! Why do you stop so suddenly? Is it that you can't remember where you're going any more, that you can't think of a place that's home or see anything more familiar than what's now behind you? The man of must and porridge and boulder and plait, the car, the salmon house, the village that murmurs. Now you sit down in the ditch. Now you stay until I reach you. I slip my fingers under your collar, and you don't resist as I lead you back. We have sardines and spaghetti hoops for our supper, with stacks and stacks of buttered brown toast. We have a tin apiece, except for the crumbly little spines, which I extract from the flesh and skin and sauce about my plate and toss to your waiting jaws. Gossamer ribbons swing from your beard and when they hit the kitchen tiles they form a viscous puddle of drool. There's something resplendent about the way you sit in your viscous drool, and it suits you. Resplendence suits you.

You hover in the living room doorway as I haul out the old armchair. With my sewing scissors and staple gun, a ball of twine and heap of frayed fleece blankets, I'm going to fix you a bed. The old chair is unusually low-sized and broad-bottomed, like something that belonged to a child and sat in a nursery in the days when children could still be sent to such rooms and instructed to be quiet. It's so familiar I can't remember where it came from, only that it's always been here. I suspect my father was the child who sat quietly in it, and once he'd outgrown the low chair, still he brought it with him, to this house. Looking closely, the wood of its arched arms are stippled with the tracks of tiny fingernails. Everything is filled with stories, an old woman neighbour told me once, the same old woman neighbour, as it happens, who taught me to sew. This is when I was extremely little, too little to understand that most things don't mean exactly what they

seem, that meaning is a flighty thing. Because of what she said, I split the seam down the back of my favourite teddy, Mr Buddy, with a serrated kitchen knife. I was searching for stories, commanding words to tumble out and configure into horizontal lines like the ones inside my story books. Instead I found Mr Buddy was all stuffed with minute clouds. I shoved the clouds in again and punched him down the back of the washing machine so that my father wouldn't see what I'd done. And even though he never did, for years and years I could hear Mr Buddy's button nose clacking against the wall whenever the washing machine went into a spin. The machine doesn't work any more, but it sits in the same spot in the kitchen, and I suppose Mr Buddy is back there still. The upright part of the old armchair is a mesh of mucky wicker. There's a lattice cut of thin ply filling the gap beneath the arch of the handle on the left side, while on the right, the lattice is missing. The original cushion is missing too, but with a ragged fleece and a bundle of shredded fabrics, now I fold and fashion and stitch a replacement. Over the grimy wicker, I drape a tasselled throw-blanket in a checkerboard pattern of pinks and blues. See how it's soft and bright now, how nice and comfortable it will be. I carry your new bed down to the kitchen. I've never had a pet bigger than a kiwi fruit before, yet I have the impression from somewhere that the kitchen is the proper place in a house for an animal to sleep. I settle it into the nook beneath the apron hooks. 'In your bed,' I tell you, 'good boy.' Now I switch the light out and close the kitchen door. You on one side, me on the other. You don't like being left behind. I should have expected this. I suppose you've never been alone in a kitchen before, where the floor is cold and slippery and the walls are built from lofty appliances which sigh and shudder and bleep. Can you hear the dripping faucet? Now the pipes expanding and contracting as though the walls are cricking out their bones, now the scribble-scrabble of claws behind the skirting boards, a rat or two leftover from the spate. Can you hear me bumbling overhead? Water running down the bathroom plughole, slippers moving from lino to carpet, the squeak of the wardrobe door opening, the thud as it swings itself shut again. Now silence as I smoke. These are the sounds of my bedtime ablutions and I perform them each night, trancelike, at the same time in the same sequence. Teeth, face, slippers, pyjamas, smoke. Finally I trip the bedside lamp switch and kill the last incandescent bulb for the night. Now I'm listening too. I hear you rise from your cushion and walk to the kitchen door. I hear you stop there and begin to whimper. It's a sound somewhere between cooing and keening, from an organ some place between belly and lung. Plaintive and elegiac, cavernous and craven. I listen for thirteen minutes exactly. I watch the luminescent numbers morphing into one another on my digital alarm clock. For thirteen minutes exactly, I lie rigid on my old springs, entranced. I get up, descend the stairs, push the door into the kitchen. You're sitting on the cold lino, eye wide. I touch you between the ears, I mean it in consolation and yet you wince. I lift the low chair and heft it back upstairs, and in the bedroom, I wedge it into a hollow between the wardrobe and the bed. When I turn around, you're standing cautiously at the threshold. I can see your nose trembling over the moths and kindling and coal dust. I squat down and pat the tasselled blanket. 'Come here,' I tell you, 'here.' You tippy-toe over the rug, clamber onto the chair. You're watching as I switch the bedside lamp out, still watching as I nestle beneath the duvet. Now I can see the small reflection of your lonely peephole. It catches the green light from my digital clock and glints though the dark. I wonder can you hear all the things I can't anymore, all the things rendered soundless by familiarity, in the same way I could never smell my father's smell even though I know he must have smelled. The hum of the generator in the grocer's yard, the echo of feathers in the chimney pot where the jackdaws nest, my shilly-shally breaths and the rasping of my tarry lungs. I wonder can you see through the open curtains to the outline of continents on the moon. The moon oceans and moon mountains and lakes full of moon water. Now I watch as your glint flickers and snuffs. Now I listen to your soft snores and grunts, the gruff lullaby of a strange animal who ought properly to be kept in the kitchen. Sleep sound, One Eye.

Tonight, I dream a strange dream. I dream it's dungeon dark and I'm belting through forests and over fields. Demented, directionless. I dream the grass blades thwacking my legs and a whirlpool of flies dizzying about my ears. I dream the crackle and pop of invisible rain. I dream chickweed, hawkweed, knotweed, knapweed, bindweed. Now I come to the last stretch of hillslope before a roadway, and here I stop, exhausted. Below the field, there's a road. Down on the road, there's a house with a glowing window. The curtains are hooked open and I can see a vase of wilted daffodils outlined above the sill, a mirror hung on the wall behind, and in the mirror, the black through the window with a wisp of angry cloud. My legs give way and I crumple. Now there's a gap, a tunnel of black. It's a thousand miles long in dream time, and it ends in a perfect circle of blazing light, as though the sun's been plucked and fixed into a grill, mounted onto a metal stalk and propped, just to warm me. Up close, the smell is of slightly singed fur and smouldering newsprint. Further away but all around, the smell is of faeces, disinfectant, the secreting fear glands of petrified animals. In the dream, smell is everything to me, smell is my native language. I hear voices and pivot my head around to the right, but there's only a blank wall with its white paint scuffed. I see I'm behind a locked door; the locked door of a cage which is high up. My head is all dodder and my face is stinging, throbbing. Now I realise that when I pivot my head around to the left, there is nothing. It is spring in my dream. At first I think I know this innately, but of the things I think I innately know, I rarely do, I've only forgotten where they came from. And so I remember, it was the cut daffodils which showed me that it is spring. — I'd say you're about the size of a badger, just differently proportioned. I've seen tens of them over the years, bludgeoned to the hard shoulder, dead as the dirt they've been splattered by. I read an article in the paper about how the Roads Authority is obliged to install a special underpass every time a motorway intersects a badger's territory. Nonetheless nine-hundred-and-ninety-six get killed trying to cross the road every year, so the newspaper said. Every year, nine-hundred-and-ninety-six badgers ignore the special underpass and go the way they've always gone. I think that's immense, appalling. What size was your badger? Was she a thickset mother sow, angry as a thwacked wasp because of the litter of newlyborns squashed into the dark behind her? Is that why she turned on you with her curved claws slashing? You don't seem to realise, but you're skinny as a mink. Your presence may be ten foot tall, even so, you're squirty as a tomcat. Your ribcage caves into stomach. Your rump tapers to a quarter-docked tail and your weight's tipped to the front like a dinky wheelbarrow. Your legs are all bone, your shoulders all brawn. Your neck's too thick for your body, your mouth's too wide for your head, your ears are just about long enough to kink back in on themselves. Now that your face is healed, you have a hollow and a gaudy scar in the place where your left eye used to be. A gouge of your lower lip is missing, and it draws your mouth down to an immovable grimace. Save for a feathery white beard from underside muzzle to uppermost nipples, you are solid black, dark as a hole in space.

A week has passed. It is Tuesday again, my Tuesday trip to town. The post office first. The bell on the door sounds my arrival. I approach the counter and slide my card beneath the indoor window. Always, it's the old postmaster. Although he's been old for as long as I can remember, the postmaster never appears to have grown any older. Even sitting in his office chair, he seems sprightly, as though the air on the opposite side of the indoor window is somehow purer than the air out here, somehow lifepreserving. As he counts my notes and coins he usually says something about the weather, about how the day is 'fierce' or 'soft' or 'desperate' or 'close', and every Tuesday I say the same thing in reply. I say Sure you'd never know from one minute to the next what's coming, and the postmaster always agrees. I scoop up my money. I thank him. And the bell on the door chimes again, as though it doesn't understand that I am leaving. Today, I bypass the jumble and head for the pet shop instead. I've never been inside the pet shop before. It smells like chipped wood, bird poo, meat-flavoured biscuits. You'd like it. You'd

especially like the lop-eared rabbit in a box on the floor, methodically chewing its cardboard walls down. It's made a hole almost big enough to squeeze its head through and I wonder if I should alert one of the shop assistants. But I don't want to insult the rabbit's efforts, so I hurry on past. I find the collar and leash section and as I browse I listen to the background lull of scrabbles and gurgles and flaps. The only noise which singles itself out is a curiously rhythmic stamping, as if of tiny feet and as evenly spaced as a human heartbeat. I want you to have a new collar for your new life. A collar I chose for you. I pick out a red one with small metal studs and a tag in the shape of a bone. What kind of bone is it supposed to be: a femur, a clavicle, a rib? At the counter, the shop assistant makes me write down the letters of your name and the digits of my telephone number. Now she punches my scribbles into a machine and feeds the tag into a slot. An invisible needle engraves the bone and the machine spits it back again. The assistant's forehead is high and mealy. I stare at it to avoid her eyes. Somehow I manage to make myself ask about the stamping sound. 'That'll be the gerbil,' she says, 'he'll be warning the other gerbils.' She hands me my change and moves on to the next customer. Let me see you in your new collar. Let me fix your inside-out ear. You look resplendent, even more resplendent. I know you can't see for yourself, but that jingling sound is the tag batting the collar's buckle every time you move, everywhere you go. I know you can't read either, but on the back it says 0214645207, and on the front it says ONEEYE, capitalised and spelled as though all one word like something in African, like you are some kind of African prince. — What did I used to do all day without you? Already I can't remember. You sit, spine against the wicker mesh in front of the living room window. Here I've angled the low chair so you can see through the glass, over the road, across the bay, and all that goes on there. Beside you in the potbellied armchair, I sit and see too. We see cargo vessels coasting in and out of harbour, containers heaped like toy building bricks. We see wading birds at falling tide, gouging the mud with their sporky beaks, pillaging a subterranean civilisation of salted organisms. And at high tide, we see pairs of ducks, always pairs. Ducks are like socks. If you've only got one, then something's wrong. We see the cars which park in the street, the people who cross to the grocer's and cross back again to their cars juggling armfuls of bags, boxes, bottles, sachets, tin cans. 'LOOK', I say, and point. See the fat man's stockpile of fridge ornaments. They're for staunching some great hunger in some small part of himself which isn't his stomach. 'LOOK', I say again, and again, I point. Now I wait for you to find the tattered cat who is prowling the shore wall, stalking a scrumpled tissue. You make a noise in your throat like a tiny propeller and this is how I know you see the cat too. Sometimes a delivery van parks on the footpath in front of the house and all we can see is the dirt on its canopy, the skid marks of a low bridge on its rooftop. You tilt your head to the left. I know now this is the thing you do when you're trying to understand, as if the world somehow makes more sense at an angle, with your sighted side slightly higher than the side the badger blinded. Sometimes the vans collide with my hanging baskets as they leave. We watch as they carry the scarlet heads of my geraniums to their next delivery. Now even the geranium heads are better travelled than I. The low-sized and broad-bottomed chair is your safe space, now it's where you always go to hide. You contract to an orb in the middle or unfurl to full stretch and kick your paws through the gap where the lattice is lost. Cloaked within the tasselled throw blanket, you are protected, and nothing bad can touch you. I hadn't expected there'd be so many commonplace, inanimate things in my father's house, my safe space, for you to be frightened of. Is it that they mean something else to you? Have you seen the ways they can be transformed into instruments of torture? Plastic bags with their rustle and squeeze, aluminium foil with its twinkle and gash, dishcloths with their thrash and wallop. And even though I've never tried to whip or choke or strangle you, still you scamper away to your safe space whenever I open a drawer or start drying the dishes. I kneel on the cold tiles of the kitchen floor. I roll out a length of foil. I place down a chocolate button and hold it out in offering to you. I know you're disconcerted, but I do it because you have to learn to fathom your way though a

world of which you are frightened, as I have learned. — Most of my boyhood fears dwindled as I grew in size and sense. I figured out the footsteps I heard by night were only the cricking pipes, that the man who skulked up the laneway in the morning to force leaflets through my door was only the postman. I started going into town and buying groceries in the big supermarkets, and there I learned how to face a shop assistant over a checkout and exchange meaningless pleasantries without whispering or muddling my words. But it's okay to be frightened sometimes. I'm still afraid of almost every single form of social situation. I still steer clear of uniformed officials. I've always had a guilty face, an incriminating nerviness, even when I was innocent. Sirens overwhelm me; only in the face of flashing bulbs do I long for the draining dimness of the energy savers. I'm afraid of swallowing spiders in my sleep, of a moth crawling into my ear drum, of toppling a display in the chemists, of my car breaking down and blocking the dual carriageway at rush hour. I'm afraid of the tiny screens that everybody carries in their pockets, of the irate way they shiver and growl. And I'm afraid of children; I'm especially afraid of children.

I roll the aluminium foil away and drop the button to your bowl. Now the food bowl is the epicentre of your existence, to which the house is attached and everything beyond radiates from, like sun beams, like the stingers of winged and boneless sharks. I collected tokens from boxes of breakfast cereal and sent them away for that bowl. The day it arrived the postman rang my doorbell and I signed my name in his ledger. Now it lives on the kitchen floor in the cubby hole beneath the apron hooks, and you check it constantly, countless times every day. It's a cubby hole as grubby as a seedy city alley. There's a layer of filth sunk into the grooves of the skirting board, buttered across the lino. Bugs creep out of the wall at night to gnaw the filth and its stickiness gathers tiny tumbleweeds of passing hair in spite of how thoroughly you clean after each meal. I see you licking every bit of surface some fugitive morsel might have touched down on, sucking up fluff and dust and sand and bugs as you go. Your food bowl is restocked three times a day, but you never take this for granted. You gobble every meal hardly using your teeth, nor your tongue, nor your swallowing muscles. 'Please chew this time,' I say, every time. 'Please chew.' I read somewhere, or maybe heard on the radio, that an animal starved in youth will devote the remainder of its life to the pursuit of eating. There's nothing here in my father's house to contest you for your scraps, not the apron tails which tease the back of your neck as you guzzle nor the appliances that sigh and shudder and bleep. Still you eat every bowlful at the speed of light, and afterwards you sit in the kitchen cubby and regurgitate the undigested lumps of kibble, catch them in your mouth for mashing and swallowing all over again. And once you're finished for a second time, again you check your food bowl. Now you know the slightest of sights and sounds which indicate I'm preparing to eat. You know the curt compression of air which signals the opening of the fridge, the click of the cupboard's magnet, the whirr of the springloaded drawer. You know the screech of spatula against the base of a margarine carton, and you know this means it's ready for you to slather out. You know, when I eat an apple with a paring knife, the exact angle my hand takes when I pare a piece especially to toss to you. A full stomach is a kind of sanctuary, I understand that. I'm a scoffer too. Even though I'm never hungry, I remember hunger and so sometimes I scoff desperately, mindlessly, as though I can eat now every proper meal I missed in childhood. It took me many years to face the shop assistants, to fathom my way into town alone, and until then I was dependent on my father who could barely cook and kept the cupboards only erratically stocked. Now when I feel the food heat oozing from my belly, bulging through my blood, it makes me feel better. Can you feel the heat, the ooze? I know the reason you check your bowl compulsively is because I'm always dropping titbits into it. A splash of milk here, a spaghetti hoop there. Wherever you happen to be in the house or yard, you hear it and bolt to the kitchen, crash into the cubby hole, your head already dropped to bowl-level. I have inadvertently trained you,

but you have trained me too. Now I let you slather everything out, every mixing bowl and plate and lid. With the herculean strength of your tongue, skilfully you propel my crockery around and around the kitchen floor, until it gets stuck beneath a stool, wedged into the fractured kickboard.

Tonight, again I dream as you. I dream I'm inside a pen with a water dish but no food bowl. I dream a man who comes once a day with a basin and trowel and he slaps scraps onto the ground with a noise like a colossal bird plop. The scraps come from all colours but blend together into brown and taste like yeast and grease and soured milk. I dream the seasons passing, real seasons, like when I was a boy. In sun times, the scraps arrive congealed. In rain times, they come puddled, diluted by drizzle to a grizzly grey gruel. Tonight, I dream of the place where you came from, the place where you were starved.

I'm going to teach you to walk nicely, and we're going to practice along the bird walk, to the very end and back again, every day. The bird walk is a belt of concrete skirting the sea front from the main street of the village to the gates of the power station. Running alongside the concrete there's a squat wall and a row of street lamps. There are flowerbeds and picnic benches and a couple of ornamental ponds. As we cross the road, you're trotting steady with the plinky soles of my shoes, keeping stride with the swoosh of my trouser legs. Here's the signpost that says BIRD WALK and here's the information board. See behind the cracked perspex, each wader's portrait in peeling and discoloured paint. But you're distracted by the tumult of smells rushing from the banks of the path to meet you. You launch into the weed-beds, nose first. The ponds are filmed by gunk too thick on the surface for skeeters and too stagnant underneath for frogspawn. What once were blooms are now mostly weeds, and even the weeds are smothered by the gloop of leaves still festering from last autumn. What are not weeds are the descendents of seeds sown by the resident's committee, years and years ago. Even though nobody tends them any more, some still manage to flower in spring and summer. See here, these buds will become marigolds, I think. And these leaves belong to the sweet-william. I know the names of most trees and flowers, but I learned them very slowly. With no one to guide me, everything I know is learned slow and fraught with mistakes. Now I know the wildflowers only by finding them, one by one, and searching in my nature book for a name, and then finding them over again and naming them for myself, until I've got them all right, and remembered. At high tide, the sea rises to lap against the bird walk's wall and gulls bob at beak-level with the concrete. At low tide, the water falls back to expose a no man's land of stinking mud. It's at low tide that the wading birds come. Oystercatchers with their startled eyes, redshanks scurrying tetchily on strawberry legs, little egrets freshly laundered, whiter than white. The path ends in a copse of pines which hide the security fencing and boxy buildings of the power station, but the trees are far too short to hide the chimney and its flossy smoke. In winter, the wind shakes their cones into the sea, and I find them washed up on the beaches. On every beach all around the bay, I recognise these pinecones. As I turn back, you're still hustling amongst the greenery. I call but you don't seem to hear, you're hypnotised by smell. Now you zig-zag the concrete, hop onto the wall and shout at the gulls, bust into a frenzied run. Now you freeze beside a tuft of primroses and plug your claws into the ground and won't budge for all the chocolate buttons in my trouser pocket. How can you be so unremittingly interested? How can every stone be worthy of tenderly sniffing, every clump of grass a source of fascination? How can this blade possibly smell new and different from that blade, and why is it that some require to be pissed upon, and others simply don't? I wish I'd been born with your capacity for wonder. I wouldn't mind living a shorter life if my short life could be as vivid as yours. You aren't exactly obedient. I want to believe your intentions are good, but I doubt they stand a chance against your maggot nose. I watch it working as we walk, drawing you into everything most vile, all the drippings and droppings left in the weeds by creatures gone before. The spraint of

an otter, the spray of a tom, a bobbin of sweet shit which you try to wolf while I'm not looking. I haul you up, prise your jaws open, shake the shit out. 'BOLD!' I holler, 'BOLD BOLD BOLD!' But I know it's wrong of me to scold what's natural to you. I'm sorry, I shouldn't holler. Another walker's coming toward us. A man in a fleece with a boxer, I think it is. Tanned fur and face ironed flat like a primate. The closer they come, the more you're tugging, tugging, tugging. I stop and draw aside from the path and bind my wrist into the leash's loop. Now you're barking and thrusting with all your strength and wrath, and I'm holding on so hard the blood drains from my knuckles. The man nods as they pass but the boxer just stares as though you're a lunatic, as though we are a pair of lunatics. 'Bold!' I whisper, 'bold bold bold!' I don't understand why you aren't throttled. I heave us on toward the information board. It takes until they've disappeared for you to calm down and walk forward again. Still for some distance, you glance behind. You whimper as though wounded, bereft. Back inside my father's house, you rest beside my plunky feet on the living room rug and I ruffle the red roots of your scalp as I smoke. Now you're yourself again. The self who doesn't sit or stay or halt or heel on command, who doesn't come back when I call, who doesn't walk very nicely, not nicely at all. Still I must admire the way you suit yourself. I don't want to turn you into one of those battery-powered toys that yap and flip when you slide their switch. I was wrong to tell you you're bold. I was wrong to try and impose something of my humanness upon you, when being human never did me any good. — See how sluggish the spring is this year. Almost May and still no sign of swallows. Look here, see this lump of flaky mud wedged into the roof cranny? It's a nest and has hatched ten generations at least. They fly all the way from South Africa, across the Sahara and the Pyrenees, just to lay their dappled eggs in my cranny. Every year they remember me, and come back. But sometimes swallows go hungry and sometimes storms knock them down and sometimes they just can't bear the slog, and stop. When I was a boy, the seasons seemed to exist more than they seem to exist now. For the past ten years at least, all year round, the meteorologist who reads the weather forecast has always said the same thing, and the picture at the end has always showed the same symbol. A raining cloud with a very small sun shying behind it. There haven't been any intensities of hot and cold or light and dark; instead it's been the same glum, tepid day over and over, and it's made me feel similarly seasonless. Apathetic when I should have been elated, drowsy when I should have been upset. Then, out of the blue, last winter grew tremendously cold. The meteorologist said there were the lowest temperatures for half a century. It put paid to my theory of seasonlessness, but not in exactly the way I wished for. Unless I succumb to one of those brain-eating illnesses of very old age, I don't expect I'll forget last winter. Now it's spring again, see how the cold has delayed all the seedlings from sprouting, stripped the hedgerows to a tangle of naked brown, worn the country roads into scree. So many bulbs remain scrunched in their shallow graves. The hibernating animals oversleep. Where were you last winter? I find it hard to picture a time when we were simultaneously alive, yet separate. Now you are like a bonus limb. Now you are my third leg, an unlimping leg, and I am the eye you lost. Do you think my swallows somehow sense how cold our winter was? If they know the way here from Africa, they must know other impossible things as well. Do you think they're breaking their flight on the continent, gorging themselves on sunwarmed flies? It's not too late, they might still be coming. Maybe, like the spring, my swallows are just overdue. — It's Tuesday, my Tuesday trip to town. The postmaster remarks how nippy it is and I say Sure you'd never know one minute from the next what's coming. The jumble shop has a set of Russian dolls and a brocade bag tied to the blade of a Samurai sword in the window, and I wonder what's inside the bag, I wonder is it an amulet. But I must pass by and stop again at the pet shop. I fish about in the collar and leash section for a muzzle that looks like it will fit. I don't hear the gerbil. Today, the gerbil is calm; the gerbil is safe. At home, I tell you SIT. This is the first of your sixty-five words and so you sit and I begin to fasten the straps and buckles around your head and neck. I promise it's not for always and everywhere, okay? Just certain places

and situations to protect you, to protect us both. I promise. You trust me enough to let me fix it on without a fidget of protest. I see how you trust me and I feel terrible that I use this trust to constrict you. Once the muzzle is on, the weight of the moulded plastic grill draws your neck down and you hang your nose, more sad than angry. At first you just sit motionless with your head hung. Gradually, you begin to panic. Now you thrash and claw at the muzzle, now you growl as though it were an enemy creature. And I feel immediately terrible terrible terrible, and free you. I hang the muzzle on the apron hook in the kitchen. It's gone now, see? We will not speak of it again. — There's only one road in the village where nobody lives. It runs up the hill and past the oil refinery. About a hundred yards along there's an enormous signboard. It stands supported by two steel legs and wears a red bulb like a miner's helmet atop its litany of instructions. DO NOT PASS THIS POINT WHEN LIGHT IS FLASHING the signboard says, PROCEED TO NEAREST SHELTER & WAIT FOR REFINERY PERSONNEL TO ASSIST YOU. This is the road where we'll walk now, the dimmest and most deserted, the best chance we have of being left alone. The ditches give way to forest either side. The oak and ash and hazel and birch form an unwieldy guard of honour. They're so tall their heads incline toward one another and meet in the middle, leaving only a thin, jagged opening into sky. The forest floor is knotted by briars and ferns. On one side it gives way to the refinery compound. On the other it casts off into a small expanse of cliff face, and now sea. Listen to the blackbird bughunting beneath the celandine, to the tap of the mussel dropped by a hooded crow against the tarmac. Now he swoops down for his seashell and lifts and drops it again, and so on until it's cracked enough to sup out the soupy innards. Step aside for the contract builder's van. Now the refinery minidigger, its bucket of sandbags. Sometimes there'll be cargo lorries on their way to the refinery with gas cylinders for refilling, and sometimes they're on their way from the refinery with gas cylinders freshly filled. Listen to them clinking against one another with the bumps in the tarmac, the sway of the axles. The road ends at the staff car park, at an intercom beside a traffic barrier. But we don't stop here, this is just the point at which we go off-road. Follow me over the hedge and through the mud prints of tractor tyres to the brow of the barley field, the top of the hill. Here we stop and here we look back across the space we've just trampled. The chimneys are sputtering sparky smoke into the morning, the refinery wind sock is jimmying about, and beyond again, see the whole of the bay all at once like a blue puddle, the village like a group of dollhouses, and my father's house in the middle, a bold pink speck amongst the beige. See the green sprouts in the gutters? I love the way the grass grows like that, high up on buildings, as though it's lost. And on the other side, see Tawny Bay sprawling below. Now follow me down slope, through the ferns and furze, to the beach. Here at sea level, the grass turns sharp and straggly. It gives way first to an uneven row of hefty pebbles, desiccated bladderwrack, drift junk, and now sand. Have you ever seen a beach before? I don't expect so. What do you make of it? The sea's a kind of river but instead of flowing sideways against an opposite piece of land, it rushes on and bleeds into sky. Here's the sand you've already found dispersed about the car blanket, now it's truly everywhere, spread into bumps like the crunchy kind of peanut butter. In some places it's freckled with heavy stones, in others it collapses beneath your paws. Smell the rot and fish and tang and wet. Feel the air zinging your eyeball. Taste the salted spray of cresting waves on the buds of your lolling tongue. There's no one else on the strand. It's too early. So I'm going to take a chance. I'm going to unclip your leash, unshackle your harness. I'm going to let you chase and rove and zig-zag feverishly, to be your own unhuman and unprogrammable self, free as a fart. 'FREE!' I yell. And you run amok between the pebbles and shallows and cliffs and caves, over the lug's extruded trails and the seagull's beak punctures. You're chasing the oystercatchers, licking beached jellyfish, guzzling crab's legs and pissing in the dunes. You're moving in a way I've never seen you move before. Slack-limbed, almost jaunty. You wag your tail. This is the first time I've seen you wag your tail. 'GOOD BOY!' I yell. Now you wade in and lie down, just for a second. And a tiny wave breaks across your

shoulders, and you skitter sheepishly back to shore. We'll go this way every day now, I promise. Past the rat holes and broken branches and litter. Past the lolly wrapper lying in the verge at the base of the YIELD sign. Past the banana skin by the refinery gates below the intercom, stealthily perishing. And every day I'll wonder about the engineer or security guard or whoever it was who ate that banana and tossed it to precisely such a spot, without thinking. We'll go when the wind is high and the seas are storming, when the mud is fluid and deep and the rain so constant that the trees afford no shelter as they should, but instead send an onslaught of accumulated droplets down on our heads. Still we'll go this way, I promise. — The mobile library comes every two weeks on a Thursday, and it smells like furniture polish and sticky-fingered children. Today, I find a book about blood sports. I flick to the chapter on badger baiting and stand with my back as a bent shield to the librarian. The driver's out on the sea front, smoking, and there's nobody else in the bus. Spring, the book says, is the season of digging out. I think I knew this already, but I can't remember why. Spring is when the sows give birth and become especially aggressive. I skip down a few lines. Badger cubs are pulled from the earth as trophies and given to the diggers to rag about amongst themselves, to finish off. It's the adult badgers captured in the woods that are kept for the baiting den, those still fighting or trying to fight. I skip down another few lines, until I reach the part I know I'm looking for. The diggers often end up with their bottom jaw clean off and a bleeding too great to be stemmed, at which point they're clubbed to death with a shovel and rammed back into the ransacked sett. Now an old woman who is one of my neighbours totters up the steps of the bus. At the top, she straightens her blazer and makes for the shelf of romance novels in enormous print. I snap my book shut and fumble it back. I check out one about Zen gardens instead, a collection of Indian folk tales and Silas Marner, again. As the librarian stamps my card, I wonder what a baby badger's called. A calf, a cub, a kitten? Already I can't remember. — I begin to nod off in the potbellied armchair with Silas lying across my chest, but I wake myself up to finish my cigarette. Now I smash the butt into the ashtray. As I begin to nod again, I see the silhouette of your head at the window. I see you staring past the shore wall, past the bay, past the opposite side of the harbour. I dream myself inside a pen at the edge of a scrapyard. I dream the scrapyard has a view of the woods and the view's divided into a hundred tiny compartments with each surrounded by a frame of galvanised steel. I dream I'm gazing through the grating, keeping watch on the woods. I see rabbits at dawn, leaves at all different stages of falling, power-lines bending in the wind, rookeries against the moon. Now I dream myself into the woods and I'm running, running, running. I've forgotten every part of myself and all the parts of my surroundings except for my maggot nose. I've forgotten the cheeps and chitters overhead, the braying of my fellow diggers. I've forgotten the details of the forest floor, the splintered twigs and smithered bark streaming beneath my feet, clinging to the fur of my ankles. Now I'm so far from the scrapyard pen I've forgotten the rabbits and leaves and power-lines and rookeries; they melt behind me as I run. In the woods, in my dream, I'm strong as a boar and quick as a buzzard. I'm ten foot tall yet scarcely as high as the shrubbery. Before I fumbled the library book back, I glanced at the glossy middle pages, at the photographs. There were three. The first showed a badger yanked between two different pairs of teeth with blood trickling through the lesions in its pelt. The second showed a sett which had subsided with the digger still inside. One of his back legs was sticking up from the earth like a tiny totem. And the third showed a photograph of you, only a you with both of its eyes. A breed calculated into existence, the caption said, for its exceptional obduracy. I wake up again. I switch on the television. It's still cold enough to warrant the nightly lighting of the gas heater, and so I light it. You get up from the window and settle yourself directly in front of the glowing bars. You lean in to stare at them, you hardly move. What are you thinking? Now you sigh so hard from the pit of your lungs that it triggers an attack of the hiccups. Sometimes I see the sadness in you, the same sadness that's in me. It's in the way you sigh and stare and hang your head. It's in the way you never wholly let your

guard down and take the world I've given you for granted. My sadness isn't a way I feel but a thing trapped inside the walls of my flesh, like a smog. It takes the sheen off everything. It rolls the world in soot. It saps the power from my limbs and presses my back into a stoop.

In the evenings, we watch television. You like the nature documentaries, the ones that feature high-pitched bird noises in particular. I like the reality shows. I like how, without scripts, people don't know what to say or say the wrong thing. I like how, without onions, people cry anyway; people cry better. I haven't lived like the characters on television. I haven't fought in any wars or fallen in love. I've never even punched a man or held a woman's hand. I haven't lived high or full, still I want to believe I've lived intensely, that I've questioned and contemplated my squat, vacant life, and sometimes even, understood. I've always noticed the smallest, quietest things. A chewing-gum blob in the perfect shape of a pterodactyl. A two-headed sandeel coiled inside a cockle shell. The sliver of tungsten in every incandescent. I've read a lot of newspapers. They stack up on the coffee table for weeks before I get around to recycling them. I know how the system of society ought to work. It doesn't make sense to me, but I've come to believe this is because it doesn't make sense. I'm not the kind of person who is able to do things, have I told you this already? I lie down and let life leave its footprints on me. All the books I've read, they stack up too. The lines and passages bleed together. Sometimes I remember characters and think, just for a second, they were people I once knew. Sometimes I remember places and think, just for a second, that it's somewhere I once was. I never remember the titles or the author's name, but I remember the covers, I always remember the covers. A gigantic valley, a tiny horse galloping. A stack of polished silver spoons. A tall man and a small man both in cowboy hats walking a red road toward a blue mountain between a tall tree and a small tree. A great fish with a pointed nose, a loose line skipping. A profile, half-man half-wolf, a single eye in the very centre. And a man rising from a pen's nib in a suit jacket to drift amongst the skyscrapers. But as for the words, the messages: I forget. And if I've been changed, so I change back again.